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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of the family assessment process for educators who work in school settings. Although school counselors and other school mental health professionals will most likely implement the formal assessment procedures outlined in this chapter, all school personnel need to consider family issues that may occasion academic, behavioral, and emotional problems among students. A thorough assessment of a student enables school-based professionals to develop appropriate remediation and intervention strategies. Assessment can help with the identification of a problem or problems, the generation of alternative ways to view the problems, and the process of deciding among interventions. (Contains 11 references.) (GCP)

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Assessment of Family Issues: A Guide for Educators

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Chapter 16
Assessment of Family Issues
A Guide for Educators

Craig S. Cashwell & Randolph H. Watts Jr.

This chapter provides an overview of the family assessment process for educators who work in school settings. Although school counselors and other school mental health professionals will most likely implement the formal assessment procedures illustrated in this chapter, all school personnel need to consider family issues that may occasion academic, behavioral, and emotional problems among students. A thorough assessment of a student enables school-based professionals to develop appropriate remediation and intervention strategies. Assessment can help with the identification of a problem or problems, the generation of alternative ways to view the problems, and the process of deciding among interventions (Hood & Johnson, 1991). The following vignettes exemplify family assessment issues.

The Withdrawn First-Grade Student

Jack is a quiet first grader. He does not seem to have many friends in his class. Although he works well independently, he gets frustrated when working in a group with other children. Recently, he became so frustrated in a group that he started crying and ran over to the teacher and grabbed her leg. At other times, he has affectionately referred to the teacher as "Mommy." He wears the same dirty clothes to school almost every day.

The Dieting Middle School Student

Lucy seemed to be a successful and happy student until recently. Although she has always been active in gymnastics, she has become more active in recent months. She talks often about gymnastics competitions and losing weight. She is increasingly distracted in class, often

fidgeting or looking uncomfortably around the room. She eats almost nothing at lunch, claiming that she is on a new diet. She looks thin and pale. She appears to be in a bad mood most of the time.

The Sullen High School Student

Jimmy, a junior, seems to have become even more dark and sullen in the past few months. Although he has never put much effort into his schoolwork, his grades have dropped significantly this quarter. He looks tired, with drooping bags under his eyes. He sometimes smells of tobacco. He seems angry and has even gotten into a few fistfights with people he claimed were his friends. His classmates have started to call him "the beast" behind his back. He does not speak in class or even make eye contact with his teachers. He seems to hurry from class intentionally to avoid a conversation with anyone. He grumbles about how no one understands him.

What is going on with each of these children? Is Jack simply a quiet child, or are there neglect issues at home? Is Lucy stressed out and a little overzealous in her diet and fitness program or does she have an eating disorder? Is her family pressuring her to succeed in gymnastics? Is Jimmy going through typical teenage angst, or is he developing a substance abuse problem, and at what level are family members aware of his problems? It is impossible to tell from the preceding descriptions the nature of each child's distress. It is clear, however, that adult attention is warranted and more information is needed.

Assessment of Systemic Issues

When considering familial influences on a student's development and functioning, the assessment process must be multimethod and multimodal. *Multimethod* assessments make use of a variety of assessment techniques, including behavioral observations of the student (and, on occasion, of family interactions); interviews with the student, teachers, and parents; and formal standardized assessment instruments. The term *multimodal* refers to assessing the cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains and the interplay among the three. To conduct an

accurate assessment that is multimodal (i.e., assesses thoughts, behaviors, and feelings), it is necessary to collect information in a variety of ways (i.e., conduct a multimethod assessment). Although the student's age may dictate what assessment methods are applicable, the central idea is to avoid overgeneralizing from any one source of information and making misattributions because of limited information. For example, a student in elementary grades may produce a drawing that appears to be sexually graphic. Although this is cause for concern and follow-up, it is important to supplement this piece of "data" with other information, such as a child interview, behavioral observations in the classroom, teacher interviews, and if appropriate, parent interviews.

Assessment is a continual process, and the process typically begins with informal procedures such as observations and interviews before moving on to more formal methods of assessment, such as standardized tests. For clarity, informal and formal assessment procedures are addressed separately in this discussion, though it is important to keep in mind that the two are not artificially separated in reality; that is, informal and formal assessment procedures complement one another and together provide more comprehensive assessment. Information from a standardized test may provide additional data and be integrated with the results of interviews and behavioral observations.

Informal Assessment Process

There are a variety of methods of collecting information on family functioning without using standardized tests. The primary types of informal assessment are interviews and observations of the student and the family.

Student Interviews

When school personnel begin to consider that family functioning may be affecting a student's academic or behavioral performance, the assessment process often begins with a student interview. Clearly, the interviewer must keep in mind the developmental level of the child. A question such as, "How are things going at home?" may produce a useful response from a high school student, but will likely be unhelpful with a student in elementary grades: Responses such as "good" or "fine" are common at this age.

When collecting family information in any form, particularly through interviewing, it is important to consider that family rules may exist against talking about familial problems. Whether this rule is overt

(i.e., parents tell the student not to talk about the problem) or covert (i.e., not talking about problems is modeled in the family system), these rules are powerful influences in the student's life. There are two practical implications here. First, it is necessary to build rapport and trust with the student. Often this process includes a period of supporting the student in *not* talking about something, for example, "That's a very difficult thing to talk about. You don't have to talk about that right now if you don't want to." Avoiding the power struggle that often follows when a student is told he or she must disclose personal information may increase trust levels and occasion important disclosures from the student. Second, it is important to watch for subtle nonverbal cues that the student is not being forthright and to listen for what the student is not saying, or how he or she is changing topics away from systemic issues. Decisions about when and if to confront these inconsistencies depend on the level of rapport with the student and perceptions of the student's readiness to discuss the issues further. Because we often do not know when students are ready to make a disclosure, a helpful statement might be "I think there is something about your family that you want to tell me, but it's hard to talk about. Whenever you are ready to talk about it, I would like to hear about it and help if I can." Such a statement treats the student with respect and avoids the types of power struggles that may influence the student to withdraw and avoid further disclosures.

A final caveat about student interviews is warranted. The maxim in family assessment may well be, "What you get depends on whom you ask." Child and parent reports of family functioning often are discrepant, with adolescents commonly reporting greater problems in their families than do parents. When conducting child interviews, it is important to remember the potential for bias in self-reporting and that you are getting only one side of the story. This fact underscores the importance of multimethod assessment.

Genograms

A genogram is a multipurpose assessment tool that may be used either with a student individually or within a family session. Considering how varied and complex family structures can be, a genogram may be particularly helpful in organizing family information. A genogram may help a younger student (who is perhaps functioning at a concrete operational level) to present information about her or his family. In addition to being a useful assessment technique for the professional educator to gain information, the process of co-constructing a genogram often gives students new insights.

Although the process of developing a genogram may be modified to fit the needs of each student, there are common steps and symbols in developing a genogram, a development that occurs in three stages. In the first stage, a family tree is developed that illustrates a student's family structure and relevant information that the student is able to provide. The specificity of this content depends on, among other things, the age of the student. In the second stage, the student provides a detailed description of each person in the genogram. In the third stage, the student discusses the quality of each dyadic relationship. Tailored to the issues and needs of each student, genograms may be used to gather focused information about various aspects of family functioning, such as attachments, emotional expression, gender roles, and culture (DeMaria, Weeks, & Hof, 1999).

Behavioral Observations

Behavioral observations of the student often contribute valuable information. For example, it is often helpful to observe targeted behaviors in the classroom. Observations may not be subject to the biases of self-report information. Further, behavioral observations are an alternative method of collecting information about young students who may not be able to provide useful information in an interview. One important decision is to determine who will make the behavioral observations. Teachers who are trained in the assessment process may observe unobtrusively. Other school personnel, who can focus solely on targeted behaviors of particular students without the responsibility of teaching other students, may provide more focused observations; however, obtrusive observation, such as the school counselor coming into the classroom, may change the environment enough to alter a student's behavior. When such observations are conducted, it is important to follow them up with a teacher interview to see how the behavior was consistent with or different from that shown in typical classroom periods.

Behavioral observations often provide information about the function or purpose of the targeted behavior (the most common purposes of behavior being attention seeking, escape or avoidance, and tangible rewards). Behavioral observations may provide information about what the child needs from her or his environment and how parents may be interacting with the child. Such information informs the efforts of school personnel to advocate for the student by consulting with parents. Consider the following scenario:

David, a second-grade student whose parents divorced about three months ago, begins having frequent temper tantrums in one class. A classroom observation and subsequent teacher interviews by school counselors reveal that the student is able to avoid certain aspects of schoolwork by having tantrums and being sent to the principal's office. A consultation with his mother (the custodial parent) indicates that this is a common pattern at home as well; she often chooses to let him out of his responsibilities at home when he throws tantrums because it is easier to do so.

The counselor realizes that the teacher and mother are both inadvertently reinforcing the tantrums by letting David out of his responsibilities. Working together, the counselor, teacher, and mother develop a strategy to reinforce David for asking verbally for what he wants (rather than throwing tantrums) and not to allow him out of his responsibilities. The counselor also works to educate the teacher and mother about the likelihood of an *extinction burst* (an initial increase in the frequency and intensity of a behavior when its reinforcer is removed) so that they will be prepared for the behavior to worsen initially and will not abandon the plan.

Family Interviews

An optimal assessment technique involves bringing in all members of the immediate family and interviewing them together. Such an interview provides a wealth of information because the facilitator may collect information based not only on what people say, but also, more important, on how they interact. Information such as who answers for the family, who talks to whom, who talks about whom, and how the problem is viewed by different family members may reveal important information about family functioning, including hierarchies, power issues, and family rules.

Family interviews should not be confused with parent interviews. In a parent interview, a parent is invited to consult with school personnel, usually about the child's behavioral or academic difficulties. Parent report is an important and clearly viable source of information. The distinction between the type of information gained in a family interview and that gained from a parent interview is one of content versus process. Although a parent may provide additional content information, a family

interview potentially provides process information about family functioning, information that may not be reported verbally by any individual member of the family because of a lack of conscious awareness of the dynamic.

One vital technique in conducting family interviews is that of circular questioning. *Circular questioning* is used to assess the perceptions of each family member about the functioning of the family system. O'Brian and Bruggen (1985) categorized circular questions as relationship oriented ("When you say you are not going to bed at night, what does your mother do? What does your father do?"), rank oriented ("Who does more disciplining of you, your mother or your father?"), or time oriented ("How was John different before you and your husband divorced?"). A final category addresses a person who does not respond to questions that are asked. Other family members may be asked to provide this information (e.g., "If Samantha had answered my last question honestly, what would she have said?"). Circular questioning is a powerful technique to assess family interactions, help the family learn about perceptions of other family members, and stimulate discussion as family members engage in the process of either agreeing with or correcting statements made about them (Brock & Barnard, 1999).

Family Task Interview

One alternative to a traditional family interview is a *family task interview* (Kinston, Loader, & Miller, 1985). The family is provided a series of structured tasks to complete. The tasks are either observed by an unobtrusive observer or videotaped (with consent) for review. The primary advantages of the family task interview are that families reveal more information about themselves through the completion of these tasks than they do through self-report in an interview (Kinston et al., 1985) and that alliances within the family are not distorted by the involvement of another person, such as a teacher or counselor (Fredman & Sherman, 1987). The family task interview begins by welcoming the family and issuing simple instructions. The family then completes the following seven tasks within a specified amount of time:

Plan together an activity that must take at least an hour (four minutes).

Get the box of blocks and build a tower (four minutes).

Discuss likes and dislikes of each member (four minutes).

Sort a deck of cards according to a pattern (four minutes).

Complete the following story: A family is at home. One

member is missing and late returning. The phone rings, and the family is asked to come to the hospital immediately (nine minutes).

Parents choose a well-known saying, decide what it means, then explain it to the children (nine minutes).

Discuss the task interview process (five minutes).

Family functioning on the tasks is then rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale in the areas of affective status, communication, boundaries, alliances, adaptability and stability, and family competence.

Family Dynamics

Regardless of the type of informal assessment process you select, consider a number of important family dynamics: rules, roles, boundaries, communication patterns, family affect, and flexibility. *Rules* refers to both the overt (e.g., for curfew) and covert (e.g., modeling of emotions that are or are not expressed) processes by which families govern themselves. *Roles* refers to the parts played by each family member. Healthy families tend to be highly conscious of each role, and there is some fluidity and flexibility in roles. Common examples of roles typically considered unhealthy are the *parentified child* (i.e., the child has caretaking and other adult responsibilities) and the *spousified child* (i.e., a child is a primary or sole source of emotional support for a parent). *Boundaries* are invisible barriers that determine amounts and type of contact both within and outside the family. These boundaries may be physical, emotional, spiritual, or sexual and exist on a continuum from disengaged to enmeshed, with healthy families considered to exist somewhere between these extremes. *Communication patterns* are often indicative of power issues in the family or needs for education about healthy communication patterns. *Autonomy* refers to such dimensions as clarity of expression, balance of authority and responsibility, and level of invasiveness. *Family affect* refers to such dimensions as range of feelings, general mood and tone of family interactions, presence of empathy toward others in the family, and presence of irresolvable conflict. Finally, *flexibility* (or adaptability) refers to the ability of family members to adapt as the needs of the family change. Examples of flexibility include modifying family rules as children get older and modifying family functioning when a child leaves home.

Formal Assessment Process

At times, it may be more effective to use standardized measures to provide information about family functioning. When administering paper-and-pencil measures to students, parents, or teachers, remember that this information is self-report and, as such, is subject to the same biases inherent to any self-report. This is a significant issue particularly when dealing with family functioning because many people hold myths about their family, that is, they believe the family is functioning differently than it is actually functioning. For this reason, data gained from standardized self-report measures should be integrated with other information about the student available from interviews and observations.

Although a thorough review of assessment instruments is beyond the scope of this chapter, there are three instruments that are brief and well researched and have reading levels generally appropriate for middle school or older students.

Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales III (FACES III). FACES III (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985) was developed to measure the family constructs of cohesion (closeness) and adaptability (flexibility), two important constructs in the family counseling literature. A substantial volume of research considers relationships among these two aspects of family functioning and a variety of behavioral and academic outcomes. Family descriptions made by various family members correlate weakly with one another (Fredman & Sherman, 1987), and these discrepancies often become a focal point in the counseling process.

Family Strengths Scale. Olson, Larsen, and McCubbin (1992) developed an instrument that measures aspects of sound family functioning rather than focusing on problems. This instrument measures two dimensions of family functioning: family pride (including trust and loyalty) and family accord. Besides looking at overall scores, responses to individual items can serve to stimulate discussion (Fredman & Sherman, 1987).

Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PAC). Developed by Barnes and Olson (1992) as an adjunct to the FACES instrument, the PAC measures two dimensions of family communication (open family communication and problem family communication). One unusual aspect of the PAC is that a separate form exists for

communication with each parent, allowing for potential differences in these relationships to emerge through the assessment process.

Guidelines for Working with Troubled Students

Whenever school personnel work with students who may have family problems that contribute to academic, behavioral, and emotional problems, they should keep in mind the following guidelines: Consult a school mental health professional, consider legal issues, understand school procedures, and make an appropriate referral when necessary.

Consult a School Mental Health Professional

Consultation with a school mental health professional typically involves sharing observations of the child's behavior and relevant parts of conversations with the child and her or his parents or guardians. It is most helpful to be objective and share concrete information rather than sharing personal feelings about the child or guessing at a diagnosis. The mental health professional will determine the best way to proceed. In most cases, the next step is to gather more information, that is, to start the assessment process discussed throughout this chapter. Although the school-based mental health professional often will coordinate the collection of assessment information, teachers are typically involved in the data collection process.

Consider Legal Issues

The law most relevant to assessment is the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (PL 93–380). This law, also known as the Buckley Amendment, gives parents the opportunity to see all information affecting the evaluation, placement, or programming of their children (Drummond, 1992). Parents or legal guardians have a right to see all written assessment information collected. Accordingly, it is important that student records include only factual, objective assessment information.

Understand School Procedures

Policies and procedures vary from school to school and are explicated more fully and in more detail in some schools than in others. It is extremely important to understand the procedures at your school before beginning any assessments and to clarify anything that is unclear about the policies and procedures regarding the student assessment process.

Policies and procedures commonly govern the practice of obtaining parental consent for assessment and circumstances that warrant referral to a mental health professional within the school, such as a school counselor, or to a mental health professional outside of the school when the needs of the student exceed the resources of the school (e.g., if the student needs extended intensive counseling or the student's problems are beyond the expertise of school personnel).

Make a Referral

When a student's needs exceed the capacity of the classroom teacher to meet them or extend outside of her or his expertise, a referral to a school mental health professional may be warranted. This person will be trained to collect information about family functioning systematically and to make informed decisions about the mental health needs of the student and her or his family. Similarly, when the needs of the student and her or his family are greater than can be met within the school setting, a referral for services outside of the school may be needed (Schmidt, 1999).

Whenever a referral of any type is made, it is important to communicate with the child what is happening. Although this is true for students of all ages, failure to discuss this with older students often has more serious negative consequences because the student may feel lied to or betrayed in some way. A typical pattern would be for the teacher to tell the child, in a caring manner, that he or she is concerned. For example, a teacher could say, "Lucy, I am concerned about your dieting. It seems that you have lost a lot of weight, and I am afraid that it is unhealthy. I have mentioned to Ms. Garcia, the school counselor, that I am concerned. I have asked her to talk with you. You might need some help and she is a very helpful person." Although this type of statement will most likely meet with some resistance from the child, being truthful and straightforward with the child will be beneficial in the long run.

Making contact with parents to obtain consent for assessment or to solicit participation in the assessment process should also be done in a spirit of care and concern. For example, the school counselor might say, "Ms. Rosa, this is Janette Smith, the school counselor at Jack's school. I am calling about Jack. He seems to be having some difficulties at school. He seems to get frustrated and cries in class quite a bit. I wonder if you would meet with me to develop a plan to help him." The goal here is to develop an allied, rather than adversarial, relationship with the parents. It is all too easy to fall into the unhelpful trap of

advocating for the child and becoming adversarial toward a parent or guardian.

Conclusions

Our goal in developing this chapter has been to discuss the assessment process and provide an overview of techniques that may be used to assess family functioning in an educational setting. The assessment of family issues in an educational setting is a difficult and complex task. Yet it is only through understanding the functioning of a student's family that many academic, emotional, and behavioral problems can be fully understood and appropriate interventions developed.

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